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## CRITICAL NOTES

### THE PRE-CHRISTIAN JESUS

Even if the limited space at command did not forbid any wide survey of the field of argument covered by the article of Dr. Case on "The Historicity of Jesus," it would still be out of place for the writer to mingle in strife about points never raised in his own writings nor deemed essential to his own theories of Christian origins. In fact, it would be almost impertinent, for although Lublinski with Kalthoff has joined the majority, yet scholars like Drews, Jensen, Steudel, Robertson, Niemojewski need not that any man should fight their battles, and the great work of the first is now accessible in English. Accordingly, my comments shall be confined to such parts of Dr. Case's article as deal with *Der vorchristliche Jesus*, in itself or as incorporated into more recent publications.

1. It is gratifying to see recognized so clearly that the heart of the matter really lies in the contention that the *Jesus-Cult is pre-Christian*, the *pièce de résistance* of recent criticism. The New Testament actually presupposes such a cult. It is quite impossible to bring down the dates of its documents so low as to allow time for the origin, growth, and maturation of Jesus-worship on the basis of a brief human life and tragic death about A.D. 30. On this point the Conservative has won against the Liberal. There remains then only the dilemma: Either the Jesus was not pure-human, but a supernatural being (it matters not in what degree, for one miracle is just as miraculous as another or a hundred—in fact, *one* would lead us to expect *many*), or else he was pure-divine, i.e., God under a certain aspect or person, and the full bloom of his worship and propaganda in the New Testament implies preliminary pre-Christian stages. A well-developed cult can no more spring up and blossom in a year than can any other century plant. This dilemma has been recognized with clearness by certain French reviewers of *Der vorchristliche Jesus*, as in the *Revue biblique internationale* (1906, pp. 645-47), and it seems safe to predict that it will finally determine the position one shall assume in the new alignment that the Jesus-question forces upon the critical world. The attempt to deduce proto-Christianity from a single personal pure-human focus has failed finally

(witness Schweitzer's *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*<sup>1</sup>), and no choice is now left save between Jesus the God-Man and Jesus the God.

2. It rather surprises one at first to read that "W. B. Smith varied the theory (of Bauer and Kalthoff) by assigning the origin of the Jesus-Cult to pre-Christian times." In Germany the Bauerians lament that Smith is uninfluenced by Bauer, if not, indeed, quite ignorant of him! As to Kalthoff, Smith's campaign was begun in 1900 (*The Outlook*, November 17), when his general view had for years been taking shape and was already definite enough for statement, whereas Kalthoff's first book, *Das Christus-Problem*, appeared in 1902, and his *Entstehung des Christentums* in 1904, when the bulk of *Der vorchristliche Jesus* was already written. In fact, the contributions of the Bauer-Kalthoff theory to Smith's theory have been practically or absolutely *nil*, nay, the two theories agree in hardly any positive aspect, but only in *not* accepting the historicity—but for widely diverse reasons.

3. "For Smith the whole subject is less a problem than it was with his predecessors and more a question of phrases." And yet he had supposed himself intently occupied for over twenty years with precisely the *one problem* of understanding proto-Christianity and especially the New Testament as resultants from the pure-human personality of Jesus. When the liberal solution proved finally inadmissible, he was guided to its polar opposite by a number of hitherto neglected indications. These were the "phrases" in question. They did indeed point the way to the solution, but in no measure did they constitute it. They suggested the notion of the divine pre-Christian Jesus, which so many have found so "strangely illuminating." But surely Smith can hardly be said to have grappled less consciously than his predecessors with a "problem" every single phase of which he has treated at length "mit peinlich genauer Exegese" in published or as yet unpublished memoirs, and for which he has proposed a comprehensive solution. True, *Der vorchristliche Jesus* was only a reconnoissance in force, to develop the position and strength of the enemy, but it was plain from the *Vorrede* that the writer's studies touched the problem all around

<sup>1</sup> In this wide interval of intense and sustained endeavor, despite many long strides forward in knowledge and the most lavish display of acumen, no progress whatever but rather regress has been made in constructing a pure-human Jesus as the Author of Christianity. "Cette sublime personne" of Renan's fancy is far more attractive and inspiring, and as the "noble initiateur" of our religion is far more plausible than (to mention only "the first three") the paltry residuum of Harnack's, or Loisy's, or Wellhausen's analysis—whose great merit is to show not how such a religion *could* but only how it *could not* have issued from such a pure-human focus.

and aimed at a complete comprehension. That he did not follow the high a priori road, but preferred the humbler guidance of sporadic phrases and disregarded minutiae, was in full accord with scientific method: "im kleinsten Punkt die höchste Kraft." When the mathematician would discover the form of a function, he observes and studies its behavior in the vicinity of its singular points; this study complete, he proceeds to constitute it so as to satisfy the critical conditions evinced. Precisely so the writer sought to construct a Jesus-conception that would satisfy the conditions imposed by many apparently isolated crucial phenomena. Such seems to be not only a proper scientific procedure, but the only proper one under the peculiar circumstances of the case. Exactly this same has Schmiedel so felicitously characterized: "Noch überraschender wirkt die Kunst seiner wissenschaftlichen Methode. . . . Möge der Leser selbst die Beobachtung machen, wie er anfangs nichts als leicht zu umgehende Steine aufrichten, dann aber plötzlich sie zu einer Mauer zusammenfügen sieht, von der er vorerst absolut nicht weiss, wie er sie durchbrechen oder übersteigen soll." It must be plain then that these isolated phrases (or stones) do not remain isolated but do all knit together into a total compact argument which the ablest critics (as Clemen) have admitted "cannot easily be shown to be untenable."

I have dwelt upon this point, because unfriendly critics have made it the principal objection to *Der vorchristliche Jesus* that it "ist nicht ein einheitliches systematisch aufgebautes und eine Zentralidee vortragendes Werk." This amounts to condemning it because it is explorative, heuristic, and a posteriori, instead of expositive, dogmatic, and a priori; in other words, because it is strictly scientific instead of vaguely visionary. The *Westminster Review* thinks "the 'pre-Christian Jesus' theory throws a startling light upon a multitude of incidents and phrases which have puzzled expositors, and even incidents and expressions that have not seemed to need explanation, acquire a new and more striking meaning." It is this power to light up the dark and to organize and correlate and fill with significance seemingly unrelated, disconnected, and unmeaning details, that is the unerring and distinctive mark of an acceptable theory.

When now it comes to the individual "phrases," the remarkable fact is that on no single point have the assailants of the book been able to agree, not one argument have they answered in a manner quite satisfactory even to themselves. Take the case of Apollos. Note the clash of explanations. Clemen, admitting they are all unavailing,

can do nothing better than *reject the statement in Acts outright*: "It could not be that he knew only the baptism of John; it follows that this latter statement must be regarded as unhistorical, but not that τὰ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ is to be taken in a sense to which no other evidence points." Clemen here follows a counsel of desperation: what he cannot explain he entirely rejects. Besides, he is certainly wrong in his last statement; there is a host of indicia that all point the same way.

Soltau<sup>2</sup> admits that the Greek phrase must have the very meaning that Clemen disallows: "Diese Worte bedeuten in der Tat wohl nicht die Lebensschicksale Jesu als vielmehr die über Jesus geltende Religionsanschauung." Here this able philologist concedes precisely what Clemen rejects the historical datum in order to avoid.

Loisy<sup>3</sup> goes even further: "C'est surtout le livre des Actes qui est exploité en faveur du Jésus pré-chrétien, et il faut avouer, par exemple, que le cas d'Apollon . . . est au moins singulier. Les explications des commentateurs sont peu satisfaisantes. L'hypothèse d'une alteration dans le texte est trop commode et peut paraître invraisemblable. Reste à supposer que les conditions et les formes de l'évangélisation primitive ont été plus complexes et plus variées qu'on ne l'admet communément."

Here the illustrious critic seems to concede far more than is safe for his own cause. If "the conditions and forms of the first evangelization" were indeed so "complex and varied," then the whole Lukan theory of the diffusion from the single Jerusalem center vanishes, the theory of multifocal diffusion (as set forth in *Der vorchristliche Jesus*) remains alone, and what is left of the current liberal view? Where is there any room for complexity and variety of conditions and forms in preaching such simple historical facts as that Jesus was a noble and beautiful human character, that he was crucified in Jerusalem, buried, and yet appeared alive to his personal disciples? Plainly such a primitive preaching of mere history admits of no such variety and complexity of conditions and forms, and in conceding this variety and complexity M. Loisy incautiously concedes the very essence of the book he reviews.

Such illustrations as the foregoing might be indefinitely multiplied. Of no single contention in *Der vorchristliche Jesus* have the adverse critics produced a convincing or consentient refutation. Vollmer says: "Der Autor behandelt den Beinamen Nazoräus, den er mit guten Gründen auf die semitische Wurzel nazar zuruckführt"; Soltau admits

<sup>2</sup> *Berliner philologische Wochenschrift*, 1. Juni 1907.

<sup>3</sup> *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature*, 24 Septembre 1906.

“der Name bedeutet zweifellos ‘Wächter,’ ‘Hüter,’ ist von der bekannten Wurzel nasar abzuleiten und hängt schwerlich mit Nazareth zusammen”]; the others, even the ablest, as Oort and Nestle, seem rudderless at sea. The pre-Christian existence of the Nasarees critics have sought to evade in many ways, but all in vain. Wernle takes refuge in a modified reading, unsupported codically nor in any case of the least avail. Others think Epiphanius is obscure and perhaps knew not whereof he wrote. He is indeed a special pleader often dark, confused, contradictory, but the point is that he is here perfectly clear, explicit, and even emphatic, and that while he may be a very bad witness *for* himself and his cause, he is an exceeding good witness *against* himself and his cause. Many have felt the irresistible force of his testimony. Thus Schwen complains recently that in the matter of Epiphanius the assailants of *Der vorchristliche Jesus* “have partially capitulated.” He like Wernle tries hard to show that Epiphanius would distinguish between pre-Christian Nasarees and post-Christian Nazorees. But what if he would? What could it show? Merely that Epiphanius in the interest of his own theory would make a distinction where there was no real difference. For the eight varying forms of the word are used indifferently in the manuscripts.

Consider again the case of the Naassene Hymn containing the name Jesus. Weinel seems to yield grudgingly the pre-Christianity of the Naassenes.<sup>4</sup> Certainly they were the very oldest of the gnostics, and gnosticism is now proved to be pre-Christian. But he thinks these particular Naassenes must have been post-Christian. Why? Because he imagines they quote from the New Testament! Now it is easily shown that all his examples are misleading; there is no case when it is not much more probable that the New Testament writer has quoted from some gnostic work or its source. Thus Weinel and others point to the Naassene citation: “Awake thou that sleepest and arise (ἐξεγέρθητι), and the Christ shall shine upon thee,” as taken from Eph. 5:14, forgetting apparently that *the writer of Ephesians is himself quoting* (from some gnostic hymn), as shown by the formula διὸ λέγει and printed in the best editions; moreover ἐξεγέρθητι looks older than the Ephesian ἀνάστα ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν. Furthermore, Hilgenfeld himself says of the Naassene hymn containing the name Jesus, “welcher freilich der älteren Gnosis noch näher steht.” Now this “older Gnosis” is certainly pre-Christian, as proved by me in a variety of ways and confirmed lexically by Reitzenstein, against the protest of Harnack.

<sup>4</sup> Ist das “liberale” Jesusbild widerlegt? 93.

Similarly anent the papyrus presenting the name Jesus. Weinel thinks it "childish" to understand the Essenes by "the pure," forgetting that Dieterich has no doubt at all of the Essenic origin of the "Hebraic Logos." Deissmann more discreetly does not attack the antiquity of the text as a whole, but merely rejects "den usurpierten Jesus-Namen" as "eingesetzt." Here too a counsel of despair is followed. Such interpolation is mere imagination, unsuggested by any textual phenomena but rather forbidden by all. For Ἰησοῦ stands at the beginning of line 3020 and is required as the name of "the God of the Hebrews." Deissmann says that the name is "in der Formelschwerlich alt," was inserted by a heathen, since neither Christian nor Jew would call Jesus "the God of the Hebrews"! Why not? It seems highly probable that the name was conceived as related to the sacred name IHVH; in some of its forms, popular etymology could hardly fail to combine the two. Besides, there is a famous epistle "TO HEBREWS" in which thirteen times Jesus is distinctly mentioned as a God.

This analysis might be pursued much further. It would be found in every case that the prediction quoted from Schmiedel had been fulfilled. At no point has the liberal German critic thus far been able either "to break through or to surmount." More recently Deissmann takes very kindly to the concept "Jesus-cult" and adopts the term as a favorite (see *Die Urgeschichte des Christentums im Lichte der Sprachforschung*, 23, 27, 28, 29).

As to the Pauline testimony, it is discussed in *Ecce Deus* (now under press in Germany) and needs no mention here. The larger question of the Pauline epistles, I hope to treat minutely before many years. Meantime it is not insignificant that even Zahn (as well as Harnack) has now yielded unconditionally to arguments in "The Address and Destination of St. Paul's Epistle to Romans" (*J.B.L.* [1901], Pt. I, 1-21), and surrenders Πῶμη in 1:7 as "unbelievably original" (*Römerbrief*, 50 f., 615-17).

On p. 41 Dr. Case makes the important point that "the stages of development in this tradition are seen to move away from Jesus, the man of Galilee, toward the heavenly Christ." But it seems proved decisively (in *Ecce Deus*) that the movement has been the exact opposite. The historization begins in Mark and Q. It passes over into humanization in Matthew and Luke and is even intensified into sentimentalization in John, where "Jesus weeps" and we "behold the Man." It is the Jesus of Mark that is a God most destitute of human features. The opening chapters of Matthew and Luke are late.

As touching the labors of Robertson, Zimmern, Jensen, they need not be valueless. As the planet speeds sweeping round the sun it gathers up showers of meteoric masses, the dust of shattered worlds, and imbeds them in its own crust. So, too, as the great idea of the Jesus, the healing, saving, demon-expelling God, circled round through the circum-Mediterranean consciousness, it could hardly fail to attract and attach to itself many wandering fragments of dismembered faiths, and the identification of these may well engage the attention of the orientalist and the comparative philologist; but the nucleus and central mass of the "new doctrine" would seem to lie nearer home and need not be sought for on the banks of the Ganges or the Nile, in the Gilgamesh Epos or in the Inscriptions of Crete.

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#### JESUS' HISTORICITY: A STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The preceding note on the *Pre-Christian Jesus*, so kindly furnished by Professor W. B. Smith, seems to demand a further word. His optimism regarding his own view is perhaps natural, but it may not be out of place here to state briefly our reasons for not sharing this confidence and to indicate some of the crucial phases of the general problem. These seem to require a much more thoroughgoing treatment than has yet been given them, if a theory of Jesus' non-historicity is to receive recognition as a possible hypothesis—to say nothing of regarding it as an established conclusion.

Giving attention to some minor matters in passing, Professor Smith's complaint that he has been accused unjustly of dependence upon Bauer and Kalthoff rests on an erroneous understanding of the passage he quotes. Instead of supplying parenthetically "of Bauer and Kalthoff" he should have supplied "of the rise of the new religion," as referred to in the previous paragraph of the article in question. In citing "the ablest critics (as Clemen)" as witnesses to the strength of the argument of *Der vorchristliche Jesus*, it might have been well to give the whole of Clemen's sentence: "In the most various departments of science it happens from time to time that assertions are put forth which at once strike the experts in the science as untenable, and yet cannot easily be shown to be so." Is this difficulty credited to the strength of the argument or to its intangible quality? Seemingly to the latter, for